SPECIAL FEATURE NO. 3-1729 JUNE 2, 1978
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A PRISON CAMP PLEDGE

ANNCR: IT WOULD SEEM AS THOUGH YEARS SPENT IN A VIETNAM PRISONER OF WAR CAMP WOULD BE AN EXPERIENCE MOST MEN WOULD LIKE TO FORGET. YET A NEWLY-GRADUATED AMERICAN PHYSICIAN THINKS IT WILL HELP MAKE HIM A BETTER DOCTOR .... AS VOA'S LARRY LESUEUR EXPLAINS.

VOICE: UNTIL THE ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS FOUND HIS PLANE IN THE SKIES NEAR HANOI TWELVE YEARS AGO, U.S. AIR FORCE LIEUTENANT THOMAS MCNISH HAD ONLY ONE AMBITION -- TO BE A TEST PILOT OF THE WORLD'S MOST MODERN AIRCRAFT. BUT AFTER SIX-AND-A-HALF YEARS IN A PRISONER-OF-WAR CAMP IN NORTH VIETNAM -- SOMETIMES IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT -- HIS OUTLOOK ON LIFE TOOK A DECIDED TURN. LIEUTENANT MCNISH VOWED THAT IF HE SURVIVED PRISON CAMP HE WOULD SPEND THE REST OF HIS LIFE AIDING OTHER PEOPLE, BY BECOMING A DOCTOR.

HE WAS TWENTY-FOUR WHEN HE LANDED IN A RICE PADDY WITH A WOUNDED KNEE AND WAS DRAGGED INTO A NORTH VIETNAMESE TOWN WITH A ROPE AROUND HIS NECK. HE WAS THIRTY-ONE WHEN FINALLY RELEASED. HIS WEEKS AS A PRISONER HAD GROWN INTO MONTHS AND THE MONTHS INTO YEARS. THE LAST PRISON CAMP BEFORE THIS RELEASE WAS A DISCIPLINARY CAMP FOR MEN WHO WOULD NOT CO-OPERATE WITH THE VIETNAMESE PROPAGANDA TEAMS. SOMETIMES HE WAS FORCED TO KNEEL FOR LONG PERIODS ON A CONCRETE FLOOR, STAND AT ATTENTION WITH ARMS STRETCHED OVERHEAD, OR ROPED BEHIND HIS BACK UNTIL THE ELBOWS TOUCHED. THERE WERE ALSO BEATINGS WITH THE HEAVY TRUCK FAN BELTS WHICH LEAVE NO SCARS.

VOICE: (CONT) SOMETIMES THERE WERE AS MANY AS NINE PRISONERS IN A SINGLE ROOM. BUT MOST OFTEN HE WAS ALONE, COMMUNICATING WITH OTHER PRISONERS BY TAPPING. SOME OF HIS GUARDS KNEW A LITTLE ENGLISH AND SOME WERE EVEN KIND. BUT HE SAYS THEY DID NOT LAST LONG, QUICKLY TRANSFERRED AFTER A WEEK OR TWO. IN MARCH 1973 MCNISH WAS FREED IN THE SECOND FORMAL RELEASE OF U.S. PRISONERS OF WAR. AT THIRTY-ONE HE HAD NOT READ A BOOK FOR SIX-AND-A-HALF YEARS. YET HE HAD EXERCISED HIS MIND AS BEST HE COULD. FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN TWICE CONFINED WITH MEN WHO HAD HAD SOME PRELIMINARY MEDICAL TRAINING, THEY TAUGHT HIM SOME BIOLOGY AND ANATOMY. FROM CATHOLICS PRISONERS HE PICKED UP A SMATTERING OF LATIN.

DESPITE HIS BURNING AMBITION TO BECOME A PHYSICIAN, MOST U.S. MEDICAL SCHOOLS TURNED HIS APPLICATION DOWN, SAYING THAT AT THIRTY-ONE HE WAS TO OLD OR THAT HE HAD LOST THE HABIT OF STUDY. BUT HIS WIFE, A WIDOW WITH TWO CHILDREN OF A PILOT WHO HAD BEEN KILLED-IN-ACTION, URGED HIM TO PURSUE HIS PRISON CAMP PLEDGE TO HEAL OTHER PEOPLE. IT WAS THE U.S. AIR FORCE THAT HELPED PAY HIS MEDICAL SCHOOL EXPENSES FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS. AND SOON LIENTENANT MCNISH, NOW A MAJOR, WILL HAVE THE TITLE OF FLIGHT SURGEON AND A POSITION IN A SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS, CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL.

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